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BOOKS AND THE BOOK WORLD

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SECTION
FIVE

Mary Johnston and Her Foe

The Metaphysical Gift Which Should Go Into Poetry
Invades and Decidedly Vitiates Her Latest Romance

MARY JOHNSTON has genius, as we all know. She has written several novels of 42 centimeter calibre, whatever the biggest guns are now. *The Long Roll* and *Cease Firing* are huge canvases in which you admire endlessly the depth, perspective, coloring, detail and composition. *Prisoners of Hope* and *To Have and To Hold* are romances that stand chemical tests—the chemistry of time, and altered mental attitudes dissolves them not. *Lewis Rand*, *The Fortunes of Garin*, *The Wanderers* and that poetic drama of the French Revolution *The Goddess of Reason* have been various revelations of her imaginative and dramatic gifts; and there is not one of her books that most living American authors would not be proud to have written.

Genius never stands still. Miss Johnston could no more go on writing the same kind of story, of no matter how excellent a kind, than she could stop writing. Her new book, *Foes*, is in no respect similar to her other work unless it be in certain mere stylistic tricks, such as the habit her characters have of repeating a phrase they want to emphasize or which they utter under strong emotion. But such things have no importance and may, indeed, be rather welcome as making us feel that we are back again among Mary Johnston's people—and very good company too.

Foes is a story laid chiefly in Scotland of 150 years ago and longer. The historical background is the rebellion which was to bring back the King from over the water and which was crushed at Culloden. This is the background merely; the foreground is here the whole story and it is filled and dominated by two men, Ian Rulloch, a fighter with the losing cause, and Alexander Jardine, laird of Glenfernie, of good Whig and Protestant lineage. Two men, we say; but the book starts with the two as boys and for some chapters Miss Johnston devotes herself to painting a memorable friendship that was to be changed to a lasting hate. David and Jonathan; Damon and Pythias receive honorable mention, but the award for boyish devotion goes to Alexander, "Old Steadfast" as the other named him, and Ian.

A Story of "I Will Repay."

What is the worst injury a man can do to his friend? What should be the course of the injured friend? What is hate? What is vengeance? Can vengeance be pursued and justice done? And what is the worst punishment that can be inflicted upon one who has betrayed a friendship? These questions and a cluster of others are struck from the reader's mind by Miss Johnston's *Foes*, and pounded until the sparks fly brightly on the anvil of his imagination.

So far as plot is concerned the first half of the story may be said to have none; the reader can foresee the course of events as clearly as if they were imaged in the weirdsome Kelpie's Pool that is the tragic centre of the story. But once having brought her two men into the attitude of mortal enemies the novelist displays her real originality and ingenuity to the delight of all who shall read the book. Her instinct for the dramatic is matched by her inventiveness and the encounters between Glenfernie and Capt. Rulloch rise on a sustained crescendo for page after page. Inevitably

other books spring into recollection, other chronicles of lasting hates and deadly feuds. We shall speak of two by artists of a degree to make comparison worthy. One is Joseph Conrad's story *The Duel*, and the other is a novel of last spring, *Foe-Farrell*, by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch. *The Duel* makes itself credible by pointing out the preposterous incredulity of the tale it has to tell. *Foe-Farrell* is distinguished from *Foes* by being, underneath the surface of exciting adventure, an acute psychological study of the hate process. *Foes* is not psychological at all; it is simply a romance in the heroic style with a metaphysical twist. The metaphysical twist is imparted by Miss Johnston, who is bent upon working out a Great Thought of her own through the medium of her two principal characters; a terrible pity. For she has vitiated a splendid story. Her art has not been able to conceal her purpose, and her purpose is not only open to serious objection for being thus too nakedly on view but it is open to serious objection because of the idea it carries.

Why Christians Will Protest.

Now there is only one class of people who will find Miss Johnston's idea objectionable. Every one will enjoy her book without qualification except Christians. For the Great Thought upon which and through which she brings her two foes to reconciliation is this: Christ, Buddha, all the supreme deities, are one. There is really one God, no matter in what guise you worship him.

This is not a new conception. It is not an unpopular conception. It is, as a matter of fact, a conception rather widely held of recent years, and it has been enthusiastically preached. But it is a conception that Christians cannot entertain and remain Christians; and so the reiterative prominence which Miss Johnston chooses to give to it will offend every Christian soul. We may even dissent from her use of it on historical grounds. It is

all very well for Glenfernie's tutor to say to himself of the laird: "Comprehensiveness. . . . He always tended to that." But it is another thing to make us believe that a Scots laird living in the middle of the eighteenth century, the descendant of a line of rigidly Calvinistic and kirkgoing folk, would ever get to the metaphysical state where the recorder could truthfully say:

"There swam upon him another great perspective. He saw Christ in light, Buddha in light. The glorified—the unified. Union."

We do not think that a Scots laird of those days ever found in the East "good growing ground." We think that Mary Johnston, travelling and musing, or cloaked and walking about the Virginia hills and musing, was intrigued by a bit of metaphysical speculation and could not resist the temptation to twine it fervently into a story. What strange things Mary Johnston really believes we can merely surmise from various disjointed ejaculations in this novel. "*All is myself*," is one. A belief in reincarnation may be another. Neither is Christian; and perhaps she offends us less by an enunciation of them, however bald and irrelevant, than by insisting upon their enunciation by persons who were decidedly Christian before all else.

The matter would be easier if Miss Johnston put her Great Thought over clearly; but she is as cloudy and incoherent and vague as the dear Swami who fascinated Mr. Don Marquis's Hermione. So far as the historical anachronism goes her eagerness to preach her idea is shown by the simple reflection that she could have effected her reconciliation of the two foes without lugging in metaphysics at all. For Christianity not only forbids vengeance but it forbids a mortal to endeavor to punish under the pretext of doing justice as a Divine instrument. And there is such a thing as Christian reconciliation apart from Christian resignation. Glenfernie would have felt the compulsion to be reconciled even though he felt no obligation to be resigned.

To Revert to the Story.

We have no wish to do more than warn readers what they must expect. Such warnings are not always clearly conveyed by the covers of a book. The other day we received a book of tales of India for children. They turned out to be stories of the reincarnations of Buddha, and the author saw fit to suggest likenesses between Buddha and Christ. One of the mouths of babes, &c., and into their ears, propaganda. Miss Johnston may think all deities one deity: does she include Gott?

To revert to the story: no apology is needed for not detailing its incidents here. It is a fine and stirring narrative couched in the highly poetic prose Miss Johnston writes so easily. Besides the Scottish lowlands and highlands, including a glimpse of Edinburgh, the action takes us to Paris, into Spain and in the midst of carnival scenes in Rome; there is even an interlude in Egypt and the desert, and a scene is set on Lake Como. The author's talent as a storyteller is fully exhibited and the book will entertain and largely satisfy many thousands of readers.

FOES. BY MARY JOHNSTON. Harper & Brothers. \$1.50.

